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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 000426

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/20/2019
TAGS: [OSCE](#) [PGOV](#) [TU](#)
SUBJECT: TURKEY: MHP -- EVERYONE'S SECOND CHOICE

REF: A. ANKARA 390
[1](#)B. ANKARA 377

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady, for reasons 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The Nationalist Action Party (MHP) is going into Turkey's March 29 nationwide local elections in third place, according to public opinion polls. MHP Chairman Devlet Bahceli has undertaken a policy of brand renewal for the party, distancing itself from its thuggish past and sculpting it into a more respectable, responsible party. However, even though MHP has played a shrewd political game in Parliament, Bahceli's lack of charisma, matched with a bland campaign and an uninspiring party platform, suggests MHP will make few gains in these elections. End Summary.

SHAKING THE PAST

[1](#)2. (C) Since he became chairman in 1997, Devlet Bahceli has entirely revamped MHP's image. Many voters who saw them as a barely-controlled band of ultranationalist "grey wolf" thugs a decade ago now accept them as a relatively respectable, responsible political party. Bahceli began this rebranding by placing technocrats and intellectuals in prominent party positions and cemented the change by participating responsibly in a 1999-2002 coalition government with Bulent Ecevit's Democratic Left Party DSP, once arch-rivals of the MHP. The party nonetheless continues to be sensitive about its past and is careful to present a rational, measured face to the public. In his conversations with us, MHP Deputy Chairman Murat Sefkatli has pointedly drawn attention to the fact that no one affiliated with the MHP has been arrested in the Ergenekon investigations and that the MHP did not participate in protests surrounding the Gaza crisis as proof of how disciplined and respectable the party has become.

[1](#)3. (C) Ertan Aydin, the vice-chairman of Pollmark polling company, noted that although MHP succeeded in gaining respectability, it ironically suffers for having become bland. He told us in a March 12 meeting that, in one of its recent national polls, Pollmark asked respondents to identify their second choice in hypothetical Parliamentary elections. Predictably, a large number of AKP voters saw MHP as their favored also-ran, but he was surprised that MHP, and not one of the other leftist parties, was also the favored second choice of many CHP voters. Aydin said that this confirms that MHP has joined the mainstream of Turkish politics but has not fired the imaginations of the voters enough to be

their first choice.

LACKLUSTER CAMPAIGN

14. (C) Though soft-spoken, MHP nonetheless still retains a strong nationalist ideology, speaking harshly on such issues as minority language use, the PKK, the EU accession process, and Cyprus peace negotiations. Giving such primacy to nationalism allows MHP to differentiate itself from the more religious and more multi-cultural Justice and Development Party (AKP), which commands the lion's share of mayoralties going into the elections. MHP is careful to couch what openness to diversity it does entertain in terms of nationalism, arguing, for instance, that Nevruz -- the Persian and Kurdish new year holiday -- should be made an official Turkish holiday in order to prevent it from being "exploited" for political ends by Kurdish separatists. The emphasis MHP places on nationalism, therefore, prevents it from being a contender in the largely Kurdish Southeast and in Kurdish emigrant neighborhoods on the outskirts of Turkey's large cities, but appeals to conservative Turks of western and Central Anatolia.

15. (C) MHP has had trouble converting this nationalist message into an effective election campaign, however. Part of the problem is that it is following AKP's lead in treating this campaign as a national referendum on AKP performance, rather than focusing on getting specific candidates into specific offices. The campaign in Ankara is a case in point. Incumbent AKP mayor Melih Gokcek's face is as ubiquitous on

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billboards as Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's, either highlighting the successes of his fifteen years of city administration or promising specific projects for the future.

The Republican People's Party (CHP) candidate, Murat Karayalcin, is also highly visible on billboards, whereas CHP Chairman Deniz Baykal is nearly absent. But MHP's candidate, Mansur Yavas, was entirely absent in campaign ads until roughly March 14, two weeks before voting day, whereas Bahceli looks down, dourly, from many MHP billboard ads. Both Gokcek and Karayalcin are, moreover, Ankara institutions; Yavas is a relative newcomer with whom much of Ankara's electorate is unfamiliar. MHP's campaign slogans are "the choice is yours" and "put your heart into your vote," which lack the urgency of AKP's "think big" and CHP's "it's the time for change." Istanbul is seeing a similar MHP advertising campaign. Perhaps most telling, the MHP did not issue a party platform document for the local elections, resting on its platform from the 2007 parliamentary election campaign. That document focuses on national, not local, issues, and does not emphasize the two issues on which AKP is most vulnerable, the lagging economy and government corruption.

16. (C) Nonetheless, the MHP has chosen its candidates wisely, choosing mainly non-ideologues with strong curricula vitae. Yavas is a good example: after thirteen years as an independent lawyer, he won the mayor's seat in the Ankara provincial town of Beypazari in 2004 on MHP's ticket. Well-liked there and credited with revitalizing Beypazari's tourism profile, he is a strong candidate for the greater municipal mayoralty of Ankara. Other MHP candidates are similarly qualified, but suffer from a lack of resources, minimal support from the party center, and having to compete with the very popular and energetic AKP for the votes on the right. The only prominent controversial MHP candidate is Aytac Durak, who became mayor of Adana in the 2004 elections on the AKP ticket but was not renominated by AKP because of corruption allegations. His popularity in Adana is still high and he has the advantage of incumbency, making him one of MHP's most likely winners in this election.

COMMENT

17. (C) The MHP is likely to hold its ground in this election, winning its traditional core of nationalist voters and poaching votes from the CHP and AKP in races around the country where one or the other party is weak. Being everyone's second choice is not a bad position for parliamentary elections, as it would allow MHP to play kingmaker in the legislature. In mayoral elections, however, it means that MHP is likely to place second or third in most locales and not at all in largely Kurdish municipalities.

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Jeffrey